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Sonya Hartnett's Thursdays Child: readings

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Sonya Hartnett's *Thursday's child*: Readings

by

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'Thursday's child has far to go', as the rhyme has it, and Tin, the titular character in Sonya Hartnett's novel, certainly travels far, though not by the usual paths: he is born to dig, as his sister puts it. But though ostensibly the central character – the book also opens and shuts on him – Tin is absent much of the time: he is an underground presence that both troubles the family and yet is seen to be their salvation. The book works on many levels, many of which Judith Armstrong has eloquently discussed, and it was her analysis that made me want to articulate my own reading; for, perhaps inspired by Tin, I'm keen to dig elsewhere, to what I see as the uncanny heart of the story.[1] But first, let me make some general observations.

Harper feels herself the most confined of the Flute children, positioned at the centre of the family (the third of five children). Her two older siblings, Devon and Audrey, each go to work for the intimidating Vandery Cable, and each is scarred by him – just as their father, Court, seems to be. But whereas Devon and Audrey move in the world above the earth, the two youngest, Tin and Caffy, are doubled in other ways: the newborn Caffy replaces Tin as the baby of the family, and Tin's displacement is overtly noted. As Harper expresses it, 'Caffy was born the day Tin learned to dig' (8); but this is also the day that Tin goes through a second birth, to emerge from Mother Earth 'shiny with slime' (17) – a Mother to whom he finds he can return, scooping out a new foetal home for himself beneath the family's shanty. There is an ominous side to this, in that Tin's unlikely return comes as a result of his father's fatalistic attempts to negotiate Tin's life for Caffy's: 'Take the new one instead. Take the new one instead' (16). It is not too long before Fate calls to collect, after Caffy becomes trapped down a well hole. Though their father has suffered much, this event marks his Job-like descent (a descent traced literally by his son). "The angels have turned their faces from your family, these last few years" (154), as a neighbour puts it. 'Court', in fact, with its obvious pun, is a most appropriate name for Mr Flute.

Harper, our first-person narrator, has an equally apposite name, a harper in classical times being a bard, someone who captures events in song. For example, it was

Orpheus, with his harp, who strove (unsuccessfully) to bring his dead wife, Eurydice, back to the outer world. Harper digs too, though her soil consists of the dark loam of the Flute family history (Judith's use of Seamus Heaney's 'Dig' captures this perfectly). And though Harper feels herself 'caged' (180), it is as a result of her containment that, like Maya Angelou, she gradually learns how to sing: 'In my heart I understood that only I had the expertise to record the adventures of this particular girl.' (181)

Apart from the incredible Tin, this is a very gritty, realistic novel, reminiscent of Steinbeck. But Tin's unbelievable activities, digging an underground system of passages around the neighbourhood, makes us cast round for more appropriate terms, like 'magic realism'. However, I prefer the word 'uncanny' for *Thursday's Child*, especially given the way Freud explored the concept in his essay 'Das Unheimliche' (1919).[2] Here Freud begins by teasing out the etymology of the German word, noting the way it slides into *heimlich*, or 'homely', and back again: that which is homely is safe, but it is also hidden from view; thus the word invokes notions of family secrets, of the repressed, and thence moves towards the *unheimlich*. Like magic realism, the uncanny only works in a realistic setting, out of which the disturbing arises, and there is always an ambivalence about its truth status. But ambivalence extends to the uncanny itself: on the one hand it represents all those things that are unacceptable in terms of the reality principle; on the other hand, it is within this unacceptable realm that our utopian dreams and wishes have free rein.

Tin is certainly uncanny in this sense. He is heroic in Court's eyes, but he also commits anti-social crimes – as, for example, when Cable drags him home, having caught Tin stealing honey from his beehives, a crime for which his father is prepared to have Tin flogged. Tin undermines the system literally as well as metaphorically, causing the destruction of the family shanty (which makes them literally *unheimlich*, or 'unhomely', too). He also avenges Audrey, after she has been sexually abused by Cable, thus bringing about Court's rehabilitation in the eyes of the community. Moreover, as an unlikely *deus ex machina* (conventionally lowered from above, not rising from below), Tin magically transforms the family fortunes by presenting them with a gold nugget he has found.

Freud also notes that the uncanny reminds us of the primitive side of the human race – which Tin certainly does. Unlike the feral child figure (to which Judith draws our attention) that so intrigued the Romantics – the child 'trailing clouds of glory' before

being socialised into 'the prison-house' – Tin works in the opposite direction, reversing the civilising process. He rejects society in favour of the natural, growing into a long-nailed, shaggy haired Struwwelpeter figure – one who 'bares his teeth like an animal does when it's cornered … just a wild thing now' (170). I shall return to this issue, but there are a couple more elements of the uncanny relevant here: the most obvious is its link to fears of being buried alive and – in many ways its opposite – a fascination with the return of the dead. Finally, a related element mentioned by Freud is the querying of the division between the animate and inanimate. Again, Tin troubles this divide, one of the most powerful instances of this being where Tin returns Caffy to the family, inanimate despite his 'fair curls' (132). It is especially powerful for the way it foreshadows a later event, when Tin brings them another bundle, which Harper supposes is a baby, but is, in fact, an inanimate gold nugget. Again we realise the appositeness of Tin's name: a base metal dug out from the middle of his intimidating forenames, James Augustin Barnabas; buried metal that puts everyone on their mettle; metal which is finally transmuted into gold. Moreover, like the Tinman in *The Wizard of Oz*, Tin's name belies the fact that he is driven by emotion, by 'his heart, not his head' (208), as his father recognises towards the end.

The one other text that repeatedly came to mind when reading this was *Peter Pan* – a story about a similarly uncanny figure: on the one hand a child but, on the other, a savage 'clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees', who gnashes his milk-teeth at adults.[3] Peter, too, opts not to grow up, and is thereby trapped in a half-life (Tin 'stays just a boy in my mind', says Harper; he 'never had to answer for being grown-up and sensible' (7-8)). The one time Peter Pan does try to return to family life (like Tin after his muddy rebirth), he finds his place usurped by another baby – again, similar to Tin's experience with Caffy. Peter Pan also dispatches the symbolic father figure, Hook, just as Tin removes Vandery Cable, an equally feared authority figure.

While I don't want to overdo these parallels, I do think that the underlying resemblance of these figures, in the mythical relation they hold to normal life, is significant. Reworking this into a Freudian paradigm – and, more specifically, a Lacanian one – both these figures could be said to reject the Symbolic order. In Jacques Lacan's model, entry into the Symbolic order means entry into language, and, as a result, an acceptance of patriarchy. Lacan saw this order as precipitated by the oedipal crisis, which precisely demands recognition of the authority of the father and, as a consequence, a relinquishing of the child's possessiveness towards

the mother. Tin, at the moment when he is required to forego this oneness, declines to take up the position offered him by society. He never accepts his place in the linguistic order (even his name is but a monosyllabic echo of his given names); indeed, we never hear Tin speak. When most provoked to do so by his father, to apologise for stealing Cable's honey, Tin merely shuts his eyes and yawns. Here, as elsewhere, Harper – who is our narrative voice, too – speaks for Tin (116).

Tin thus stands in complete contrast to his father, who has always bowed to social pressure, and lived an alienated life as a consequence. We learn that when he was younger, Court's own father bullied him into joining the war, calling him 'coward' and predicting 'the white feather' treatment if he didn't join up. 'Your own children …will forever hang their heads in shame', he warns his son (69) – a prophecy averted thanks to Tin. At his father's death, Court discovers that he has been deceived to the end, his father leaving Court very little to inherit, and certainly not the family house they expected. As far as Court is concerned, though, Cable is an equally oppressive representative of the Symbolic. He is forever reprimanding Court for his stupidity, treating him like a child; and Court responds in deferential fashion, calling him Mr Cable. Whenever Court is in Cable's presence, as Harper observes, her father behaves like a nervous child, wringing his hands, 'buckling his hat' (54) and is often seen 'stripping his nails to the quick' (48). If Court lives up to his name, with its connotations of being trapped, or snared (just like the rabbits they subsist on), then it is Cable's bonds that are partly responsible for holding him – and the rest of his family, with the exception of Tin. Even after Cable has sexually abused Audrey, Court's initial reaction is to have his daughter marry Cable, in order to hush up the scandal. It is of note that even Court's war-wounded ankle seems to be partly a psychological scar – a result of his inability to 'stand up' to society – hence its emphasis in connection with Cable: 'As he limped away … he could feel Cable's eyes tracking him' (55). Significantly, it miraculously disappears when Court finally rebels and seeks Cable's blood: 'the old war wound that had lamed him for years suddenly seemed healed' (185). Harper then imagines him standing 'taller than he'd ever stood before, tall and straight and dignified' (185).[4]

Of course, it is Tin who does away with this Symbolic father (albeit armed with a pick that his father had once given him); just as Tin – not his father – had earlier dug his own small body out of the mud-bank (Court, we are informed, had only ever retrieved corpses from the unforgiving mud). Regardless of this, after each of these episodes

Court is seen to walk taller and, at the end, he receives the approbation of the whole community for Cable's disappearance; as Mr Murphy informs him:

> 'Everyone's saying that wherever Cable ran to, he's still running. They're saying that, when he heard you were coming to exchange a few words, he took off faster than his jinker could move, that's why he left it behind. He recollected he was only a hog man, you see, and that you yourself are a soldier.' […]
> 'Is that what they're saying?' Da puffed himself out' (210-11)

But in rejecting the castrating order of language – castrating because the wholeness of existence (of oneness with the mother) is chopped up into alienating, linguistic fragments – Tin, like Peter Pan, has to take the consequences. That is, he has to exist outside normal representation. He is like one of the 'lost boys' that Peter Pan appropriates – those that fall out of their prams when their mothers aren't looking; or, rather, because their mothers were looking elsewhere, perhaps to a younger sibling. And, as others have noted, Peter Pan is also associated with the fairy folk: with those who steal children, sometimes replacing them with changelings; with those who are abroad at night, stealing honey and the like from farmers (Judith, again, has already drawn parallels with the lob or house-elf); and, of course, with those who can also find gold.

Certainly, then, Tin is a mythical figure, which is exactly how he is apotheosised at the end:

> It was Tin, who was mythical, and he looked just that way…. He seemed to hover above the earth somehow, the curious glow of his flesh illuminating him. I would not have been surprised if wings had opened up behind him and he'd shown that he could fly. (213)

Just before this, when their father first spots him, he murmurs 'Jesus'. Again, like Peter Pan, Tin is god-like, but he is not thereby mortal – he is not able to exist in the everyday Symbolic world. So, in the family's eyes, at least, Tin too becomes transmuted into more of a traditional *deus ex machina* figure.

This last point is very important, for the whole story is related to us through Harper's eyes; Harper, who also feels a need to exculpate her guilt over Tin's disappearance

beneath the bank, and Caffy's disappearance down the well hole; Harper, in fact, who, despite the subterfuge of the title, is really the central character, and who, therefore, is responsible for that alternative reading that is forever scrabbling at the edge of the reader's consciousness – especially when we set Tin alongside Peter Pan. For it could well be that our narrator, Harper Flute, is unreliable, flexing those novelist's wings that she discovered earlier, when she 'populated the house with one valiant young lady after another, sheets of paper spilling from beneath …[her] lead-stained hands' (181). In other words, it could well be that what she tells us is a projective fantasy, a screen memory to avert her feelings of guilt. At times, she hints as much: 'Memory is eccentric', she notes, 'stalls when it wants to' (7). And, towards the end she speaks of another self – her child self – 'still out there somewhere, rebellious in her rage, scouring the tunnels for Tin'; a self that 'cried that it was cheated, that this was a coward's way of concluding the story' (215) – that is, with the gift of the miraculous gold nugget which seemingly unites the family.

Here Harper seems to come closest to admitting that her device really is a far-fetched *deus ex machina*; that Tin's nugget is about as likely to unite the family as was their newly built palatial house with its 'gleam of gold' (104), 'blinding at sunset, glorious at dawn' (105). Though the family 'talked all night about the life awaiting … within the nugget' (216), it is only words, dreams. For Harper also informs us that she hasn't seen her parents for years; that her father, 'bitten by the mining bug … spends his time scratching feveredly at the land' (216), and Ma keeps him company. Only Harper and Audrey actually escape to the ocean – a place that Harper has dreamed of since she saw it pictured in a book; and the one place where there can be no troubling underground, and none of the attendant, claustrophobic, murky secrets. 'I miss Tin,' Harper tells us,

> who would be a young man now but is, in my memory, still a boy. … we are all glad Tin is safely underground, ploughing past the bones of cavemen and dragons, a young boy only because I haven't seen him for years. (217)

We start to wonder at our imaginative narrator, and reconsider that mud slide on the bank which first engulfed Tin, taking him underground amongst the bones of the past – wondering whether, perhaps, he was only ever resuscitated in the family's mind, and Harper's in particular, in order to perform his death-defying feats of the imagination, thus making Harper's hard enough life more tolerable. This is left deliberately ambiguous, though, as the uncanny effect always is, being 'easily

produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced', as Freud notes.[5] Our uncertainty is maintained to the book's final sentence, when Harper imagines another meeting with Tin: 'His hand will be dirty when he places it in mine, and mine will not be clean' (218). Are we really to believe that Tin might tunnel all the way to the ocean? Or does it suggest, rather, that Tin is long dead, and that they can meet only beyond the grave, when Harper's hands will also be soiled with earth? Whatever the case, Harper sounds more culpable than she has let on; that that younger self which still rages underground, scouring the tunnels, has hands stained not with soil, but a harper's hands, 'lead-stained' (181).

Notes

[1] Judith Armstrong 'Sonya Hartnett's *Thursday's Child:* Readings,' *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 35, no. 2, June 2004, pp. 155-64.

[2] Sigmund Freud 'The uncanny' *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, pp. 335-76

[3] J.M. Barrie *Peter Pan* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 [orig.1911], p.24

[4] Oedipus, whose name literally means 'swollen-foot', also had injured ankles. It is certainly noteworthy that it is Tin, the one who refuses to undergo the oedipal process (i.e. to submit to the laws of society), who rescues the family from their 'downtrodden' state.

[5] Sigmund Freud 'The uncanny' *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, pp. 375.

References

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